



Wisconsin Consumer Complaints on the Rise in 2014

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EDITORS: A pdf of the 2014 DATCP Consumer Complaint Statistics is linked at the bottom of the release.

MADISON – Scammers and thieves stepped up their efforts to steal your money or identity in 2014 based on the double digit increase in complaints received at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP). Overall, complaints filed by Wisconsin consumers were up more than 10% in 2014 compared to last year, and four out of the top 5 categories of consumer complaints all saw substantial increases.

Knowing what issues consumers report may help you avoid becoming a statistic on next year's Top Ten list. Some of the major issues affecting consumers last year included phone fraud, tax identity theft and propane issues.

Telemarketing complaints topped the list again in 2014; making up 19% of the total complaints received by the agency. A variety of phone scams currently ringing throughout the nation are the main type of calls consumers reported.

"We are seeing an explosion in the number of phone calls from IRS imposters," said Sandy Chalmers, Division Administrator of Trade and Consumer Protection. "Consumers also report receiving fraudulent calls offering 'Credit Card Services,' Microsoft tech support and medical equipment."

The telecommunications category, a group that includes cable, internet, phone services, satellite, and cellular plans, increased by 31%. Issues regarding misrepresentation, unauthorized charges and unsatisfactory service were the leading reasons for complaints. Complaints against US Cellular for billing issues; stemming from a new system; constituted more than 29.5% of the complaints in this category. DATCP worked with US Cellular to resolve those complaints, and consumers received more than \$18,000 in credits, refunds and bill adjustments.

Identity theft was growing problem for Wisconsin consumers last year, with 460 complaints filed – an increase of 16% over the previous year. Tax identity theft was a driver for this category. Stolen personal information lead to fraudulent tax filings of victims throughout the state, as well as being the most commonly form of identity theft reported nationally.

"Have a strategy in place to protect yourself from tax identity theft," said Chalmers. "Never respond to an email or phone call requesting your Social Security Number. Be sure to mail tax documents from the post office, rather than leaving personal information in the mailbox at the curb."

Finally, last year's harsh winter and subsequent propane shortages in the state prompted 455 complaints to our agency, putting it on the Top Ten list for the first time.

To help Wisconsin consumers weigh their options when buying propane, DATCP created a fact sheet that includes background on common delivery and pricing options and suggested questions to ask providers when comparing offers. The fact sheet can be found on the DATCP website (<http://datcp.wi.gov/uploads/Consumer/pdf/PropaneConsumerTips500.pdf>) or can be requested by mail by calling 1-800-422-7128.

For additional information on the 2014 Top Ten complaint list or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at datcp.wisconsin.gov, call the Consumer Information Hotline at 800-422-7128 or send an e-mail to datcphotline@wisconsin.gov.

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